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ABSTRACT

This paper focuses upon the question of how a cross sectional research team might prepare to provide research results to an urban school system in such a way as to maximize their usefulness in the development or redevelopment of school district policy. The aim of this team is to provide for the acceptance of positive change over time, within the organization. The paper is based upon the notion that implications for policy planning must be considered before the results are released and that the degree to which researchers are prepared, in advance, to deal with policy-sensitive items, will relate to their ultimate success in persuading organizational decision makers to make new policy or modify existing policy based upon the results of the study. The paper examines five data sectors utilizing as criteria for such an examination seven rules previously developed by Baldridge and Deal in "Managing Change in Educational Organizations" for use in assessing the strength of a change strategy. Each of the criteria is applied to each sector and to a number of the variables which compose it in an effort to ascertain potential problems which might occur. The five sectors or variables examined are: socioeconomic status, school characteristics, teacher characteristics, instructional support, and the reading program. Each variable is analyzed briefly according to seven basic criteria: 1) diagnosis of the specific problem, 2) historical relevance, 3) environmental support, 4) organizational structure and indivdual attitudes, 5) manipulability of the factor, 6) political and economic feasibility, and 7) effectiveness. (Author/AM)

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AN URBAN SCHOOL DISTRICT/FEDERAL RESERVE BANK COOPERATIVE STUDY: IMPLICATIONS FOR POLICY

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AN URBAN SCHOOL DISTRICT/FEDERAL RESERVE BANK COOPERATIVE STUDY:

IMPLICATIONS FOR POLICY

I. Introduction

A good deal of literature and research exists on the difficulties involved in implementing organizational change. The relationship between organizational structure, environment, and the acceptance of innovation has been extensively studied, as has organizational resistance to change. (See, for instance, Havelock, Miles, Eichholz, Rogers, Lippett.) A good example of a large city school system's resistance to proposed changes may be found by examining its reaction to a study conducted by the Federal Reserve Bank of Philadelphia.

Early in 1975, the Federal Reserve Bank of Philadelphia released the results of a study of that City's public schools. The results engendered considerable controversy, in terms of the methodology utilized, the results, and their implications for policy making.

After a hiatus of nine months, the Federal Reserve Bank (FED) and the School District agreed to initiate a pilot study, utilizing the FED's methodology to identify practices which are associated with improved reading achievement in the fourth grade.

Since January of 1976, months of initial planning, data collection and analysis have been invested in this landmark cooperative effort. The study is notable for a number of reasons; including the cross-disciplinary approach to the problem, the use made of multiple regression analysis, the pupil specific and class specific nature of the data, and the potential policy implications of the results.

Perhaps one of the major reasons for the organizational resistance to the initial study was that the results were not viewed by the School District as being directly applicable to policy decisions. The School District agreed that the report might serve as a first step toward achieving better fiscal management, but that the limited scope of the data upon which the report's conclusions were based raised several serious questions. School District researchers pushed for cross-validation as a necessary first step before the translation of the results into policy could legitimately be considered.

This paper will attempt to focus directly upon the question of how a cross sectional research team might prepare to provide results in such a way as to maximize their usefulness in the development or redevelopment of school district policy and, in doing so, provide for positive change (or, as it is sometimes referred to, organizational development).

The paper is predicated upon the notion that implications for policy planning must be considered before the results of a study are released and that the degree to which researchers are prepared, in advance, to deal with policy-sensitive items, will strongly relate to their ultimate success in persuading organizational decision makers to make new policy or modify existing policy based upon the results of the study.

Accordingly, this paper will examine five data sectors (groupings of similar variables) utilizing as criteria for such an examination seven rules developed by Baldridge and Deal for use in assessing the strength of a change strategy. The criteria will be applied to each sector and to a number of the variables which compose it in an effort to ascertain potential problems which might be faced in the development of policy as a result of the research findings. It is not expected that all results, however, will result in problems. It is likely that some policy implications will be readily

acceptable to decision makers, while others, due to the nature of the variable being considered, (e.g., standard SES variables) will simply not be within the locus of control of the school system.

II. The Factor of Controllability

Policy decisions based upon studies of this type cannot be developed without consideration of the controllability of the variables being studied. A certain number of variables will, by nature, be beyond the control and/or manipulation of any organization. Factors falling most commonly into this area are of the SES variety, and would include race, sex, family background and income.

A number of major studies conducted earlier concluded that the impact of educational factors was minimal and, in fact, non-controllable factors, such as family background, provided the major impact upon pupil achievement.

The now famous Coleman Study (1966) showed, amongst other things, that the student's family background was the most critical factor in determining his achievement. Jensen's highly controversial work in the area of IQ (1969) ascribed the great majority of a student's aptitude and achievement to genetic factors, rather than to the impact of educational intervention. In the early 70's, Christopher Jencks further muddied the murky waters with the publication of "Inequality," in which he concluded that neither the quality of schooling nor family background had much effect on students' future earnings, but, rather, luck was the most critical variable.

If one were to accept as gospel the findings of any of the three studies mentioned above, he might likely conclude that educational policy formulation was a waste of time, and that very little of what educators do, in an attempt to serve children, is likely to be effective.

The initial Federal Reserve Study was predicated upon a rejection of earlier studies and served to prove, to some educators anyway, that education does make a difference. Specifically the study found that "certain school inputs do make a difference in achievement growth" ... and that "many (inputs) are particularly effective when they are directed to the type of students who will benefit most."

The major policy implications suggested by this initial Federal Reserve Study according to its authors, were that:

1. Certain school resources can be utilized to achieve a greater degree of equity in educational opportunity.

2. Since certain inputs produce greater output (in the form of achievement) than others, resources can be shifted to generate greater output without incurring significant additional costs.

3. If specific input variables can be ascribed to educational achievement, educators should be held accountable for the manipulation of such inputs to produce as high a rate of output as possible.

III. The Use of Sectors

In a study of this type, utilizing multiple regression analysis, the number of variables being examined lends itself to collapsing variables into larger groups of related variables so that a more meaningful analysis might take place.

Five sectors have been developed for the purposes of initial analysis:

1. Socio-Economic Status (SES). This sector relates directly to pupil characteristics and includes such areas as pupil's race, sex, family income, absence rate, mobility rate, kindergarten experience, etc.

2. School Characteristics. Included in this sector are variables directly related to the school unit. Variables considered include school capacity, enrollment, average daily attendance, mobility. economic indicators, racial composition, pupil achievement, staff size, etc.

3. Teacher Characteristics. Included in this sector are the educational background and experience of each teacher, the teacher's sex, race, involvement in curricular planning, the teaching strategy(s) utilized, rate of absenteeism, etc.

4. Instructional Support. The instructional support sector, cuts across a number of the categories of persons responsible for facilitating the teaching process. Included in this sector are approximately a dozen variables relating to the school principal, the school reading teacher, reading aides, staff development, etc.

5. Reading Program. Included in this sector are such variables as the instructional approach and the basic program (instructional materials) utilized, supplementary materials, instructional time, etc.

IV. The Baldridge-Deal Criteria

In the introductory chapter of their book, Managing Change in Educational Organizations, J. Victor Baldridge and Terrence E. Deal suggest a set of seven rules which should be taken into consideration in attempting to implement a strategy for change. These rules, upon careful examination, may be useful in providing a set of criteria against which a change strategy might be assessed in order to determine its potential for adoption and utilization.

The Baldridge-Deal criteria have been slightly modified for the purposes of this paper so that they might function as a sounding board to determine the potential difficulties in translating the results of the cooperative study into policy decisions. The seven basic criteria are as follows:

1. Diagnosis of the specific problem - Has some form of needs assessment been undertaken so that the particular policy area being considered has first been established as a problem in need of a solution?

2. Historical relevance - Is there a fit between the recommended change and the (internal) traditions of the organization?

3. Environmental support - Is there a fit between the recommended change and what is acceptable to outside (external) forces?

4. Organizational structure and individual attitudes - Does the recommended change provide for the meshing of the needs of the organization and the needs of the individual?

5. Manipulability of the factor - Is the factor or variable manipulable? Is it within the realm of the organization to change it?

6. Political and economic feasibility - Can the proposed change be implemented within the realm of the political structure of the organization and economic constraints within which it functions?

7. Effectiveness - Is the proposed change an appropriate solution to the problem?

V. Analysis

The purpose of this Section is to assess each of the five sectors (described in Section III) utilizing the criteria developed from the Baldridge-Deal rules discussed in Section IV.

The socio-economic status/pupil characteristics sector is a particularly difficult one with which to deal, in that a majority of the variables which comprise this sector are not within the locus of control of the organization. However, the information may still be useful in shaping policy. The SES sector does not lend itself readily to the diagnosis of specific problems, in that we cannot correctly consider areas such as income, sex, race, etc., as problems. Nor can such variables be translated into needs, unless one wishes to discuss a guaranteed minimum income and its impact upon the education of low income children. Areas such as kindergarten experience and pupil mobility do lend themselves to a needs assessment.

If a school system has a tradition of providing school related social services, such as health care, food services, and day care services, the historical relevance of the proposed innovation might prove favorable to a policy decision in this area. Similarly, though school-related social services might be welcomed by the community (as in the environmental criteria), the costs of funding such programs might create problems sufficient to offset community support. In considering the meshing of organizational structure

and individual attitudes, the SES sector again represents a host of uncontrollable variables. There already exists, however, a considerable number of special programs designed to serve lower SES children, (e.g., Title I), so that a base upon which future policy might be developed already is available.

The manipulability of the factor, its political and economic feasibility, and its effectiveness, should also be considered as non-controllable when dealing with the SES sector. One exception to this might be in a recommendation to provide additional kindergarten experience or to institute a program to reduce high mobility or high absence rates. Otherwise general SES variables tend not to be within the locus of control of a school district.

Policy planners dealing with the school characteristics sector need to take into consideration that here too, in certain instances, a number of the variables are non-controllable. For example, though a needs assessment of characteristics might be undertaken, such variables as present capacity and enrollment are non-controllable. Similarly, racial composition might be taken out of the school district's hands by court desegregation decisions, and staff size is generally dictated by union contract.

The area of historical relevance suggests that policy considerations must be tempered with an understanding of the difficulty inherent in changing the "neighborhood school." In such cases, local district traditions might run head-on into system desegregation requirements, though the promise of increased academic achievement might well be one way to deal with such resistance. External environmental support would be similarly effected. Nevertheless, neighborhoods are changing, and the promise of improvement of inner-city schools provides strong incentive in the implementation of policy in this area.

It is essential that the overall organization be flexible relative to such areas as facilities, staffing and desegregation if individual attitudes are to be dealt with. The physical factors in the school characteristics

sector might be, given sufficient funds, quite manipulable, though the SES factors would not be. The political feasibility of new policies in this area, particularly where they relate to the neighborhood school and the desegregation of facilities, would have to be "handled with kid gloves." Cost would not necessarily prove to be a major concern, for existing facilities could be made use of.

The variables comprising the teacher characteristics sector are ones about which very little is known. There is a serious deficiency in terms of research related to those characteristics which contribute to a teacher's success. Hence, a diagnosis of the specific problems, though important, might serve as just the first step. Where there is a tradition of local hiring and of absorbing locally trained teachers, there might be resistance to new policy in the area of historical relevance. Assignment according to race and sex is certainly permissable if used to promote integration of staff. It should be noted, however, that this relates to the assignment of personnel and not their hiring. Policies in this area would likely be supported by the community, but not by the unions. As such, the school district would either be forced to make certain concessions or to take a hard line with the unions in the development of new policies.

It is obvious that the early involvement of bargaining units in the planning process is a must. Many of the teacher characteristic variables will certainly prove difficult to manipulate without re-vamping the personnel system and re-negotiating existing union contracts or revising new contracts. There would also doubtlessly be political problems with any policy relating to the selection, hiring and assignment of teachers, and once the school district takes a hard line with respect to contractual considerations, economic problems might also be created.

Few of the variables within the instructional support sector have been studied, hence it is difficult to prophesize without a needs assessment in this area. Since reading aides serve various functions, a rather complete diagnosis would also be appropriate here. Once needs assessments have occurred, however, the school district could exercise rather direct control over appropriate staff training and development activities.

Though there exist certain traditions in the area of hiring principals and aides, these are changing. There is little historic precedent relative to reading teachers and staff development.

Depending on the policy proposed, either fragmented support or resistance might well be expected. It should, of course, be taken into consideration that principals and reading teachers are represented by separate bargaining units, and that neighborhood and community groups might have direct interest in the hiring of aides.

The way to deal best with the integration of organizational structure and individual attitudes is to involve all appropriate groups early in the planning process. The School District will likely have to change some of its attitudes, and in doing so, demonstrate its willingness to also change some of its structure and policy. Here, too, the variables might prove difficult to manipulate without re-vamping the personnel process and dealing with union contracts. Certain political problems might be expected, though cost likely would not be a factor unless additional staff were required.

A complete needs assessment of the variables comprising the reading program sector would not be necessary, in that those programs funded categorically already require such an assessment, which is generally implemented on an annual basis. In addition, a directory and glossary of reading programs and instructional approaches has been developed on a grade-

by-grade and school-by-school basis and is updated annually. Supplementary studies, however, particularly those dealing with the best use of time and the pervasive question, "what works in teaching children to read," would certainly be appropriate.

Little internal resistance to new policy would be expected if local support is tended to. Similarly, the criteria of environmental support might be wide open to policy alternatives though the constant ebb and flow of curricular fads would have to be neutralized.

In order to mesh organizational structure with individual attitudes and policy, new approaches to the selection of programs and instructional materials might have to be developed. Such factors would be very manipulable and should cause virtually no political problems. It should be taken into consideration, however, that if new materials are to be developed, extensive time is required and costs could escalate.

It is difficult to assess any of the five sectors against the criteria of effectiveness (i.e., the appropriateness of the solution to the problem). Logically, the cooperative study being undertaken will provide information about this relationship and should suggest (1) decisions to develop new policy, (2) further control studies, or (3) the direct application of certain findings in the form of organization modifications.

VI. In Conclusion

The purpose of this brief paper has not been to doom in advance the recommendations which might result from the Cooperative Study of Successful Practices in the Teaching of Reading analyzed herein. Quite to the contrary, it is the author's firm belief that this study has the potential to provide information of critical importance to and major impact upon the School District

of Philadelphia and perhaps, ultimately, a much broader audience.

Without advance planning, however, many very excellent studies never move beyond a library shelf or filing cabinet. Dissemination has not been the concern of this paper, however. Dealing with resistance to change and preparing for the translation of results into policy has been its focus.

It has been suggested that the identification of potential problems in advance of their occurrence, will provide those who view the study's results to be of importance, with sufficient time to develop the strategies necessary to neutralize resistance to change. It is toward such an end that this paper has been developed.